

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH:

**A comparative study of ethnic identity among Azerbaijani speakers in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan**Mostafa Khalili<sup>1</sup>**Abstract**

In 1828, Azerbaijan was divided between the Persian and Russian empires through the *Turkmenchay* treaty. From 1920, the northern part was joined to the Soviet Union as the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, until its independence in 1991. Having been governed by the Soviet Union for a long time, residents of the Republic of Azerbaijan are strongly influenced by Russian culture, while residents of Azerbaijan provinces of Iran have been under the influence of Persian culture, literature and politics. This article, inspired by Edward Said's definition of "otherness", argues that the perception of "others" has developed differently for the Azerbaijani identity in these two geopolitically separated areas. North Azerbaijanis define their ethnic identity and nationalistic movements as a reaction and in opposition to Armenians. Iranian Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, live in peace with a large Armenian diaspora, and thus instead define their identity by emphasis on their rights under Persian governance. Using the constructionism theory of Stuart Hall, the paper argues that Azerbaijani identity has been redefined in two Southern and Northern forms in a fluid and contingent way of "becoming" rather than "being". An ethnographic observation of the everyday lives of the two ethnic groups showed that other than history and language ties, the vast range of cultural, economic and political differences have shaped two different ethnic identities. Interviews with the recently increasing number of tourist visitors to both South and North Azerbaijan demonstrated that the two have a pessimistic perception about one another and believe that their own path towards modernization is the right one, but not the other. Nationalistic movements among Iranian Azerbaijanis represent a struggle to overcome discrimination, and in extreme cases, a demand for secessionism. They cannot, however, conceive of themselves in unification with the Republic of Azerbaijan either. In conclusion, I suggest a redefinition of Azerbaijani identity as two entities sharing a common language and history.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijani, Ethnic identity, Identity construction, Iranian Azerbaijani, Otherness, Republic of Azerbaijan.

**Introduction**

Two consecutive wars between Persian and Russian Empires, ended in signing the two treaties of *Gulistan* and *Turkmenchay* in 1813 and 1828, respectively. These treaties, which were major defeats for the Persian Empire, caused a tragic division between the large Azerbaijani populations on the two sides of a new border. Some contacts continued between the peoples of the disjointed areas, but this stopped with North Azerbaijan's incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1920 and the formation of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (Swietochowski, 1995). After that, the setting up of a system of border guards made it too difficult for people to pass through the border, and any attempt to communicate with people from non-socialist countries was subject to severe punishment (Matthews, 1989:195). Thus, until 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, there were almost no relations between the Azerbaijani people on the two sides of the border. In such a desperate situation, many despondent poems and dramas about the virtually insurmountable border were written on both sides.

After the proclamation of independence in September 1991, the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia entered a bloody war over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Even after the ceasefire in 1994, both

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countries have continued to claim the region, and this contentious conflict has caused enormous hatred between citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Following the war, the Republic of Azerbaijan was divided into two separated parts, disjointed by Armenian territory. As Armenia disconnected the routes to the enclaved part, the residents of Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic were isolated from the mainland. This separation has caused major problems for these citizens, who have had to pass through Iran to reach the other part of their homeland, which is troublesome and costly.

In 2015, the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan was estimated at more than 9.5 million, 91.6% of which belonged to Azerbaijani ethnicity (Population census 2015). On the other side of the border with Iran, Iranian Azerbaijanis comprise the largest population of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the world. Being the dominant ethnicity in the Northwest of Iran, they live in three provinces of East and West Azerbaijan and Ardabil (Figure 1). They are the largest minority in Iran, comprising about 24% of the total population, with many living in other Iranian provinces. Many cities including Zanjan, Qazvin, and Hamadan have a large Azerbaijani population. Some Azerbaijanis have migrated to the Iranian capital Tehran, and other nearby cities such as Karaj, since long ago. In smaller numbers, they live in other Iranian provinces such as Kurdistan, Gilan, Markazi and Kermanshah (Shaffer, 2002: 221-225). There is still an intensive debate among Persian and Iranian Azerbaijani elites on how Iranian Azerbaijanis should be called. However, Persians and Azerbaijanis themselves commonly use the term “*Turks*” to refer to Iranian Azerbaijanis (pronounced as *Tork* in Persian). The term “*Azeri*” is not considered as correct by many academic scholars, but may be used by Iranians in formal conversations (Kasravi, 1946).



**Figure 1.** Iranian Azerbaijanis in northwest provinces of Iran. (Source: Geography from GMMS 2011, Global Mapping International Language Locations from World Language Mapping System 2011)

This study focuses on the conflicts and tensions surrounding the imagined and articulated identity among Azerbaijani people. To that end I will draw on the understanding of identity formation in cultural studies, particularly as described by Stuart Hall, and a broad spectrum of constructionist views applied to the analysis of ethnicity and nationalism. I shall first present a brief theoretical summary in order to situate my study within the methodological practice of constructionism and the intellectual tradition of cultural studies.

## Methodology

The primary data for this paper was collected in three demographically diverse regions, including the northwest of Iran, especially the city of Tabriz, various cities in the Republic of Azerbaijan and some cities in Iran with a dominant Persian population including Tehran, Karaj and Qom, where many Azerbaijani diaspora live. Being born and raised in the city of Tabriz, which is the most populated Azerbaijani city in

Iran, I had been searching for the origins of my ethnicity on the other side of the border. However, most of existing literature on the ethnic identity of Iranian Azerbaijanis has been influenced by a strong Iranian nationalistic view. Beyond the dominant political presumptions and common historical speculations, there is a lack of ethnographic research studies on this issue. Therefore, I needed to first discover the perception of ordinary people about their identity and what they believed they shared with the so-called “co-ethnics” living on the other side of the border.

Starting from October 2009 until April 2012, while living in Tabriz and also as a sojourner to the Republic of Azerbaijan, I collected the primary data for this paper as a participant observer. In the Republic of Azerbaijan, by making friends in public places like universities, museums and bars, I gradually entered into the family and social life of indigenous people. In the beginning, they would usually guide me in the city and introduce me to historical and cultural places, but over time I was permitted into their everyday life, staying in their homes as a guest and participating in their marriage, mourning or religious ceremonies. Sometimes, I would stay and participate for more than a week in local marriage ceremonies as a close friend. Often, I came to know many people from various social classes through snowball sampling. During this period, I conducted qualitative interviews with many Azerbaijanis of different ages including some who had never crossed the border of Iran as well as tourists, sojourners, and businessmen who regularly traveled to Iran. The interviewee’s ages ranged from 20 to 70 years old. In most cases, I first built a friendly connection with the younger participants, interviewed them, and then asked them to introduce me to the other members of their family and acquaintances. While it was not difficult to find a way to enter into an Azerbaijani family circle, being a single young boy, I did not have any chance to interview young girls due to cultural norms. During my short stay in their houses, the female members of the family rarely showed up.

However, in Azerbaijan of Iran, as an indigenous researcher, data collection was much easier for me. I interviewed many people in Tabriz, in the same age range of 20 to 70 years old, as well as several members of ethnic/nationalistic movements in Azerbaijan of Iran. Being a part of the society, I did not face any limitation in collecting data from female participants in Tabriz except for a few traditional religious families. During data collection, one of the best places to find interviewees was the visa application queue in front of the building of consulate general of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Tabriz. I interviewed many people there, like businessmen, students who were studying at a university in the city of Baku (capital city of the Republic of Azerbaijan) and some tourists who had never traveled there before. From July 2012 to June 2013, I lived in Tehran, and was in close contact with Iranian Azerbaijanis who migrated there more than 30 years before. In Tehran, too, it was easy to arrange interviews with Azerbaijani ethnic people I knew or found in Azerbaijani populated neighborhoods. Iranian Azerbaijanis living in Persian dominant cities were eager to talk about their identity issues. I interviewed various people about their ethnic conflicts as diaspora living in Tehran. I also traveled to some nearby cities like Karaj and Qom to observe the circumstances of Azerbaijanis there.

After that, for one more year until the end of 2014, I returned to Tabriz to make contact with the flood of medical tourists from the Republic of Azerbaijan who travelled from Baku and other cities to Tabriz. Acting as an Iranian guide for some of them, I would follow their treatment procedures in Tabriz. Whether in informal daily conversations or in formal interviews, I would ask questions about their perception of the ethnicity of Iranian Azerbaijanis.

**Theoretical Framework:** Cultural research can challenge the relatively stable, coherent and unitary notion of ethnic identity. Cultural studies have conceived identity formation as relational, contextual and never fully formed but always under transformation. Frantz Fanon first introduced to ethnic studies the idea of identity as relational through the psychoanalytic concept of the “others” when he recalled how the gaze of the ‘other’, a white child pointing her finger at him and telling her mother “look, a Negro!”, framed him as a ‘black’ man (Fanon, 1967). A similar situation has existed for Iranian Azerbaijanis since the Pahlavi dynasty when the ‘other’ groups started using the derogatory term of “*tork donkey*” to refer to them, ascribing a

stereotyped feature of dumbness to Azerbaijanis.

Edward Said maintains that *“European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient”* adding that European cultural hegemony established itself by positing a European identity superior to all others (Said, 1979). Said explains the notion of ‘otherness’ by considering social identity through the construction of opposites and ‘others’. The actuality of others is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’; far from a static thing then, the identity of self or of the ‘others’ follows a historical, social, intellectual, and political process as part of a contest which involves individuals and institutions in all societies. Unlike the *“naïve belief in the certain positivity and unchanging historicity of a culture, a self, and national identity”*, Said observes insightfully that *“human identity is not only not natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright”* (Said, 1979). In the following parts, I shall discuss how the notion of ‘otherness’ has been established so differently for Azerbaijani ethnics in different parts of Iran, compared with the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Stuart Hall for his part draws on Fanon and Said as well as Marx, Freud, Derrida, Gramsci, and Althusser, among others, to conceptualize identity as fluid, relational and contingent (Hall, 1996). To engage in the question of culture and power, domination and resistance, cultural studies complicate identity as a matter of becoming rather than being, an arbitrary closure, and an *“invention”* always created under social pressure. Our identity is not inexorably tied to our past, real or imaginary; rather, it is subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power. There is no single, stable, or homogenous ethnic or national identity. It is contingent and structured by social formations (Hall, 1990).

I shall argue in the following sections that Hall’s explanation of fluid identity could illustrate the current social and cultural variations between three different *“Turk”* ethnicities living in Turkey, Iranian Azerbaijan and the Republic of Azerbaijan’s citizens. The descriptive view of everyday life in various Azerbaijani and Turkish cities, and people’s perception of being Turk is far different in these areas, especially when compared with the three countries referred in this paper. I will argue that the view of contemporary nationalistic movements, especially in the city of Tabriz, which aim to define Azerbaijanis and Turks as a holistic nation is in contrast with people’s perception in everyday life in different Turk-Azerbaijani areas, since culture, politics and the definition of *“otherness”* in each Azerbaijani area is far different from others.

Yuet Cheung (1993: 1216) defines ethnic identification as *“the psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage, an affiliative construct, where an individual is viewed by themselves and by others as belonging to a particular ethnic or cultural group”*. An individual can choose to associate with a group especially if other choices are available and thus centers the construct in the domain of self-perception (i.e. Iranian, Azerbaijani or Turkish ethnicities in the case of Iranian Azerbaijanis). Affiliation can be influenced by racial, natal, symbolic, and cultural factors (Cheung, 1993).

The image and perception that one has from his group identity is not innate but shaped gradually and through his lived experience. Each society has its own system of group identity. In some societies, family connection is emphasized more in shaping the identity, while in others geographic connection (place of origin) or religion is emphasized more. Which factor becomes the most dominant and significant in shaping the identity is largely dependent on various circumstances (Smith, 1991).

In the modern world, usually the most important group identity is the country of citizenship. This identity type is associated with legal rights and responsibilities under the constitution of the country. In the complicated process of nation-building in every country, many factors affect the final formation and geographic-population coverage of each nation. This is why many transnational human groups have existed. Where the drawn *“national borders”* had been determined by many factors, even accidents in some cases, once the *“border”* was drawn, the system would follow the government’s direction. Gradually the *“border”* would become significant not only administratively but also economically and culturally (Tiankui, Sasaki and Peilin, 2013). In the last part of this paper, I have discussed about how the nation-building process of the post-Soviet Azerbaijan and post Islamic revolution Iran have influenced their Azerbaijani speaking citizens.



## Findings and Discussion

***Otherness for Iranian Azerbaijanis:*** For most Iranian Azerbaijanis questioning their own self-conceived ethnic identity has been a significant and difficult issue in identity formation. During my research travels to non-Azerbaijani dominant cities of Iran, or while living in Tehran, I could barely remember anyone who did not react to my Azerbaijani accent while speaking to them in Persian as my second language. It appeared as if Persians needed to choose a certain stance on this widespread ethnic group. Almost all people in the capital would somehow react to Azerbaijani speaking people. The most common reaction would be to recognize the odd accent and ask which Azerbaijani city one is from, or to use some metaphors in a sarcastic way to express their view of “how dumb or intelligent” Azerbaijani people are. It seemed that everyone needed to somehow react “differently” when they met Azerbaijanis; most of the time, they started a conversation by saying how good, hospitable, and intelligent ethnic Azerbaijani are, but after feeling more intimate, they might move the dialogue to some sarcastic description of Azerbaijani people. In extreme cases, during arguments between two Persian and Azerbaijani persons, it was common to hear the ethnic slur Turkish (Azerbaijani) people. Iranians, I spoke to, usually call Azerbaijani people as “*Tork*” and some may even question whether Azerbaijani ethnic people are truly Iranian. In everyday language of Persians, “*Tork*” is a sarcastic metaphor for a dumb or stupid person. This metaphor has become so popular that sometimes even Azerbaijani people too, may use it when a friend makes a funny mistake.

Facing such ethnic harassment has caused many Iranian Azerbaijanis, especially those living in Tehran and other Persian speaking cities, to be highly sensitive about their ethnic identity. Although Persians living in different cities of Iran have their own local accent in speech, they are considered as belonging to “us” by other Persians.

***Otherness for the Republic of Azerbaijan’s citizens:*** A significant feature that distinguishes Iranian Azerbaijanis from those of the Republic of Azerbaijan is their paradoxical attitude towards Armenians. Following the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia, from the late 1980s to 1994 the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan assume Armenians as their sworn enemy, who committed atrocities in Karabakh city. However, Iranian Azerbaijanis never considered that war as their own, and have hosted a quite big Armenian diaspora living in peace for a long time in the city of Tabriz. Armenians live in one of the famous and rich neighborhoods of the city. Although their culture, religion, ethnicity and “blood” are far different from other citizens of Tabriz, they have been treated well in this city for a long time. Therefore, one of the major critics of Azerbaijani people in the Republic of Azerbaijan is questioning why Iranian people and government, especially their “brothers” in Iran who knew about the atrocities, keep good relations with Armenia and Armenians, their most hated enemy (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Nagorna Karabakh region: The conflicted area between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia

Every time I asked my Armenian friends whom I knew for a long time since high school or university, they expressed their satisfaction with how Tabriz citizens treated them as members of a diaspora in the city. However, this causes Azerbaijanis from the Republic of Azerbaijan to look down on their “brothers and sisters” in Tabriz. They believe that even if Iran’s government has good relations with Armenia, Iranian Azerbaijanis should not let them stay in Azerbaijani speaking territories. Iranian Azerbaijanis sometimes travel to Armenia for pleasure and to enjoy more public freedom; however, Azerbaijanis living there despise such behavior. When they want to make closer friends with Iranian Azerbaijanis, they commonly ask them whether they have been to Armenia or not. If the answer is “yes” they commonly decide not to have a close friendship. Even in political relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, the issue of Armenia plays a significant role. Whenever Iran wants to share cultural events or enhance economic relations with Armenia, the Republic of Azerbaijan’s government reacts by downgrading its relations with Iran.

Since Armenia closed the routes to a separated part of the Republic of Azerbaijan territory after the war, people of the smaller part, Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, became isolated. Thus they feel the effects of politics in their everyday life much more than the residents of the larger country. In my first trip to Nakhchivan in 2007, I was surprised when a young student asked me if he could find some Armenian girls in Tabriz to rape because he hated all Armenians. In another case, I met a medical student who wanted to become a military doctor to serve in a probabilistic future war between the two countries. In contrast, many Armenians in Iran settled mainly in Tabriz and Isfahan among other Iranian cities a long time ago, built some churches in conservative *Shia* cities of Tabriz and Isfahan, and enjoyed a peaceful life for many years. In Tabriz, they are even famous for being an honest, truthful and hardworking minority.

***Otherness for Turkish people:*** It has been a subject of debate for a long time whether or not Azerbaijani people, in Iran or the Republic of Azerbaijan, are originally Turks. Recently, especially after Turkey sped up the process of modernizing the country, while Iran and Azerbaijan are still lagging behind, Azerbaijani people in both the Republic of Azerbaijan and all the widespread diaspora tend to consider themselves of “Turkish ethnicity”. There is a similar sentiment among Turkmen and Uzbek people. Some historical debates suggest that all Turks including Turkish people, Azerbaijanis, Turkmens and even some ethnic groups in eastern China used to belong to a larger nation that was once called “Turkistan”. They are thus searching for a way to prove that originally they were of the same ethnicity.

However, since Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan were not under the Ottoman Empire for a long time, this left a gap between them and the Turks living in contemporary Turkey. The current demography in most Eastern parts of Turkey is dominated by the Kurdish ethnicity which is far different from Azerbaijanis as well as other ethnicities in Iran. This fact has resulted in a situation where Iranians and Azerbaijanis find a completely different culture and language in the area across the Turkish border. Thus, there is a vast geographical area, occupied by Kurds, between Azerbaijanis and Turkish people belonging to Turkey (Figure 3). However, most Turkish citizens call Azerbaijani people as their brother, sharing the same blood and ethnicity with them.

While in a close relationship with many Turkish citizens, especially in Istanbul, I found few people who knew that a large Azerbaijani diaspora live in Iran. For Turks in Turkey, there is not much difference between Azerbaijanis in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan; they find both groups of ethnic Azerbaijanis very close to themselves, and as speaking in a dialect of Turkish. However, in contemporary politics, Turks face serious conflicts with Kurdish residents of Turkey, and the most important issue for them is defending their territorial integrity and ethnicity against Kurdish secession. One could see significant discrimination against Kurdish people in Turkey, similar to ethnic discrimination against Azerbaijanis in Iran. Even though Turkish citizens respect their Azerbaijani brothers, they seem reluctant to participate in any nationalistic movement to support Iranian Azerbaijanis or against Armenia in favor of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Aiming to join the European Union as soon as possible, they want to look to the West rather than get involved in another ethnic conflict in Iran or the Republic of Azerbaijan. We may interpret their attitude

towards Azerbaijanis as neither rejecting nor accepting them. Instead, the nationalistic movements in Turkey define themselves as anti-Kurdish with the purpose of having a pure Turkish territory, but not aiming to have a united territory with Azerbaijanis or other ethnic groups who consider themselves originally Turks.



**Figure 3.** Kurdish inhabited areas in four nearby countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. (Source: CIA fact sheet)

As Edward Said points out on defining ethnicity with the concept of “otherness”, one could see that three different “others” exist for the Turkish-Azerbaijani ethnicity. The Republic of Azerbaijan citizens define their ethnic identity as being different from Armenians. Iranian Azerbaijanis define their ethnicity under domination by Persians in Iran, and Turkish citizens shape their ethnic interest in response to the Kurdish threat, eager to define themselves as Europeans rather than Asians. So the three ethnic groups are fighting on three different fronts to gain an identity while each front seems to be independent from the others. Sometimes one ethnicity appears even to be helping the other groups’ enemies in so called conflicts of “us against them”.

**Cultural fission, shaping different ethnic identities under Persian and Russian domination:** During frequent travels to the Republic of Azerbaijan and while in contact with Iranian tourists there, I realized that Iranians usually were asked lots of questions about various cultural and political issues in Iran. Once I was in a wedding ceremony of a friend in Nakhchivan, thinking about differences in wedding customs and ceremonies in Tabriz and Nakhchivan, when the DJ played a “Persian song” for me as their “dearest Iranian guest” and asked me to perform a “Persian dance” for them. I was very surprised, since we always define ourselves as Azerbaijani rather than Iranian; when I am in a non-Azerbaijani city in Iran in a wedding, I am asked to perform an Azerbaijani dance. One could easily see that even though citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan call Iranian Azerbaijanis as their brothers and sisters, they still believe that Iranian Azerbaijanis are Iranians who follow the Persian culture, not Azerbaijani.

The complete separation of Iran and Azerbaijan since 1828 after the treaty of Turkmenchay and spending more than seventy years under the domination of the Soviet Union has radically influenced the culture, language, religion and social values of people in the Republic of Azerbaijan while a similar situation occurred for Iranian Azerbaijanis under Persian rule. Nevertheless, sharing the same language and folklore plays a significant role in keeping the ties strong between them. In the following part, I am going to look at some of these similarities and differences between the two cultures.

Language is of central importance to ethnic identity, and it has been argued that language can work to prime either the original or host cultural identities (Hong et. al, 2000). Azerbaijani language spoken in Republic of Azerbaijan has gone through hard times switching from one writing system to the other. With changing the script three times, from traditional Arabic to Latin, from Latin to Cyrillic, and going back to Latin again, reflects an identity crisis caused by the changing social and political situation in the country.

Each of these changes was applied either voluntarily or under political pressure to shape the national identity of the country closer to the neighboring states. Yet these changes had benefits as well as challenges to the cohesion of Azerbaijani identity. Safizafteh (1998) describes the significant influence of these transformations on the identity of Azerbaijanis as: *“How can you speak about the identity of a people whose alphabet has been changed four times in the last seventy-five years?”*

Following independence, the Republic of Azerbaijan changed their alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin aiming to get closer to Turkey, both culturally and politically. These consecutive changes between different alphabets have led to a recreation and reformation of many Arabic rooted words in these two languages. However, since both countries have their education in their own language, gradually they have set a standard to spelling of different words from Arabic. Moreover, they have already set a standard for words which were pronounced with different accents in different geographical areas.

In Iranian Azerbaijan, the situation is far more complicated in terms of language and identity and quite unique. They speak in Azerbaijani, write in Persian and cite prayers in Arabic. However, their multilingual living has been challenged both internally and externally with either-or choices in the name of national identity or ethno-national consciousness (Safizadeh, 2013). Iranian people are educated in Persian using the Arabic script as in most other Islamic nations like the Ottoman Empire and Azerbaijan of the Russian empire up to 1928. However, Iranian Azerbaijanis never changed their script to Latin, even during a one year of declared independence from Iran under the name of Azerbaijan People’s Government from 1945 to 1946. Even today in Iran, the few books and magazines published in Azerbaijani, use Arabic alphabet. Iranian Azerbaijanis and especially the young generation receive no academic education in their mother tongue, so naturally they are confused when it comes to written communications. During my interviews, I found out that the situation has become more complicated since the rise of social media; they use computers with Arabic alphabet which lack specific characters in Turkish or Azerbaijani such as: “Ç Ğ İ Ö Ş Ü”. That is why they use English letters instead, but since there is no unified set of rules, nowadays, some Iranian Azerbaijanis prefer to speak in their mother tongue and write in social media fully in Persian to avoid any confusion. Moreover, since more vowels are used when writing with English letters compared to Arabic, it is easier to use English letters to show how a word is pronounced. This in turn can cause other problems such as emergence of different written versions of a single word due to different local accents.

In spite of all these confusions, differences and difficulties, both ethnic groups in North and South Azerbaijan can still understand each other easily, even though their language has been highly influenced by the Russian, Persian and Arabic languages, respectively. This can be seen as an important cultural link between them.

Hammond (1988) cites Durkheim noting that religion is a derivative of social circumstances that creates an enabling environment for involuntary acceptance of a way of life, especially as a consequence of group membership. For instance, people are made to manifest their sense of unity and belonging as a result of group membership through participation in rituals, ceremonies, belief systems or orientations and behavior towards symbols and objects perceived to be sacred and treated with sense of awe and wonder. Azerbaijanis both in the north and south follow the Shi’a branch of Islam; however, following the fall of the Soviet Union, a specific kind of vernacular Islam has been shaped in the Republic of Azerbaijan which is distinct from the Iranian version (Aliyeva, 2013). Such differences play a critical role on identity formation among Iranian Azerbaijanis who are known as conservative Shi’a Muslims in Iran, and are strongly influenced by the Shi’a definition of the post Islamic revolutionary Iran. Tabriz is one of the most conservative religious cities of Iran while Azerbaijanis of the Republic of Azerbaijan are not sensitive about Islamic regulations after being governed for a long time by the Soviet Union which discouraged religion. The Republic of Azerbaijan is still a secular country after independence. Few people in Baku or other cities of Azerbaijan would not drink alcohol because of Islamic rules. Their women, especially the young generation, rarely wear Hijab. There are mosques in cities and rural areas; however, their main usage is mostly for mourning and to conduct funeral ceremonies. People in their everyday life rarely go to mosque, except for a few clergies. During the month of



Ramadhan, restaurants are open and only a few people fast. However, in Tabriz, as well as other Azerbaijani cities of Iran, the majority of people are strictly religious. Most families are concerned about their women's Hijab. If someone wants to drink alcohol, even if they have a chance to find it in Iran where the use of alcoholic drinks is prohibited, they drink in private with some close friends to avoid social persecution.

In home decoration, fashion and clothes, and wearing of makeup, Iranian Azerbaijani women think that people in the Republic of Azerbaijan are lagging behind the modern world. They rarely follow the media of North Azerbaijan unless for some nostalgic films or songs, since they consider them as socially immature and pre-modern, while those in the Republic of Azerbaijan have the same conception about Iranian Azerbaijanis. I had several discussions with the young generation from Baku who judge Iran as a barbaric country ruled by Islamic clergies. They think that Iranians have no freedom, but their own country is secular and is a much better place to live compared with Iran.

For me, before my frequent travels to the Republic of Azerbaijan, it was quite obvious that I was from a minority ethnicity with roots in the Republic of Azerbaijan. My mindset completely changed, however, when I travelled many times to the Republic of Azerbaijan and faced many differences in culture, politics and everyday life customs between the two. Interaction with neighboring countries through traveling is one of the most influential components of cultural assimilation for ethnic groups (Berger and Huntington, 2002). Since 2008, the Iranian government has not required visa from citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan; so many Azerbaijani people are travelling to various Azerbaijani cities in Iran, mostly for medical care. Nowadays if one goes to any hospital or famous clinic, one will find at least some travelers from the Republic of Azerbaijan. Since there are not sufficient health services and good doctors in the Republic of Azerbaijan and the cost of treatment is higher in their home country than in Iran, they prefer to travel to Tabriz to find good doctors who speak their language, and to access inexpensive and high quality surgery or medication. However, they usually complain that Iran subsidizes treatment just for "Iranians" and not for "foreigners". Although the treatment cost for Azerbaijanis is officially set by municipality at twice the usual fee of Iranians, most doctors charge foreign patients even up to five times more than Iranian nationals.

Most Azerbaijanis are well aware of this issue and always complain about being cheated by ordinary people, doctors, in restaurants, hotels, by taxi drivers, exchange shops and almost by everyone, despite being their "brothers". Most of them hire some driver/guide for a whole day from the border areas, who knows their dialect better than people in Tabriz, to help them translate in Persian or even in Azerbaijani language, as their language includes some Russian words. I interviewed some of them in a hotel in Tabriz where they expressed that for them it's more economical to be charged by an escorting taxi driver for their whole trip in Tabriz rather than being charged by individual drivers. Azerbaijanis from Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, while expressing complements and suggesting that they belong to the same ethnic group, same blood, and are brothers and sisters, still do not regard the "*other*" one as truly brother or sister.

The first sojourners from Iranian Azerbaijanis to the Republic of Azerbaijan were some university students. Some rich Iranian Azerbaijani families, whose children failed to pass the difficult entrance exams of Iranian universities in engineering or medical sciences, send their children to rather expensive, low rank and low level educational universities in Baku and Nakhchivan which do not require an entrance examination for Iranians and foreigners. These students are well aware of the fact that the Iranian Ministry of Education will not recognize their diplomas as valid and they have to pass some requirements to get an equivalent valid diploma in Iran; however, they choose to study there since it is a good way to shortcut the entrance examination to dentistry or medicine or engineering in Iran. I have friends who are studying in those universities and usually do not want to speak about the situation in their universities, but when I asked from their Azerbaijani classmates, they told me that their professors take bribes to grade the students. They complain that to be a good student is not a matter of studying well, but of paying more.

Iranian students there commonly complain that they are being cheated everywhere for being foreigners. They say that their landlords usually charge them more by bringing some unreal excuses. Taxi drivers or shopkeepers do not treat them well either. Iranian tourists, whether Azerbaijani or Persian, mostly complain

that the Republic of Azerbaijan is a country with a bureaucratic system based on bribery. During my own travels to the Republic of Azerbaijan, I was asked several times to pay a bribe to police for no reason. Sometimes when passing across the border, custom officers would ask passengers to pay a large amount of bribe; otherwise they would not have the permission to enter the country. The police are especially too strict with foreigners. I heard from people in front of the Republic of Azerbaijan consulate in Tabriz how people from Tabriz had been cheated everywhere. No one recommends traveling to Baku with your personal car since most probably the police would stop the car asking for bribes, and if one resists, he may get a large fine without having broken any laws.

***Nation-building influences Azerbaijani people both in the north and south:*** Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, new political discourses have arisen in all the emerging republics emphasizing cultural norms, values and locality. This suggests that the development of the new nations and states in the area involves the reconstruction of cultural, political and ethnic space, which is a characteristic of the twentieth century nation-state formation. In case of the Republic of Azerbaijan we could track the nation-building process in manipulating their language, dominance of ethnic Azerbaijani citizens of the nation and being anti-Armenian as the main symbols of national identity building in post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

In Iran, the cultural rights and political activities of the ethnic minorities has been severely oppressed for a long time. In the absence of mainstream distinct political movements, it is difficult to gather all Iranian Azerbaijanis under one united definition. In an anthropological approach, I asked some elderly Iranian Azerbaijanis how often their everyday life was affected by Azerbaijani identity in the early years of Islamic Revolution and during the 8 years of Iran-Iraq war period. Most ordinary Azerbaijani ethnic citizens, either in Tehran or in Tabriz, described themselves as under the full influence of Iranian nationality. Especially during wartime, Azerbaijani soldiers and commodores fought bravely and gained lots of praise from the government. The war helped the sense of Azerbaijani identity merge with Iranian national identity.

Iranian Azerbaijanis have played an active role in both the process of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). In this era, the Iranian government used the concept of defending the nation against Iraqi invasion to create a national identity for all Iranians, regardless of their ethnicity. However, after the new independent Azerbaijan was established, Iranian Azerbaijanis took a different attitude towards this new political situation. Some political groups gained power through the support from north Azerbaijan and nationalistic movements. I interviewed some elderly nonpolitical citizens to explore their perception on their national identity. Many of the interviewees didn't feel that Azerbaijan needs to be independent from Iran; however, they believe that their right to learn their mother tongue at school should be recognized by the Iranian government. Some others felt that nothing had changed for them as an Iranian Azerbaijani. They never thought of joining the northern part since they believe that the land had belonged to them for a long time and they are quite comfortable in the current situation.

As mentioned in this paper, although Azerbaijanis in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan do not have such a good relationship in their daily contacts in recent years, some nationalistic movements have grown among Iranian Azerbaijanis. However, their situation has changed dramatically over recent years. Two decades ago most Azerbaijanis might have preferred to speak Persian even in Tabriz, but the use of Azerbaijani language has now become commonplace, displacing Persian in most of the predominantly Azerbaijani areas of northwestern Iran. Ordinary Azerbaijanis in Tehran and elsewhere do not hesitate to speak in their native tongue, showing pride in their ethnic identity. Importantly, demonstrations for ethno-linguistic rights have become more frequent in Iranian Azerbaijan. Although they are often violently suppressed by the police, with the demonstrators routinely subjected to imprisonment, they still continue. Separatist flags of Southern Azerbaijan are occasionally displayed visibly overnight in Tabriz and other cities of Iran's Azerbaijan, along with posters advocating Azerbaijanis right to education in their native tongue. Some specialists like Atabaki (1993:182) have claimed that Iranian Azerbaijani speakers have lost their identity among Iranians, especially in recent years.

As a result of the imposed restrictions on any politicized expression of Azerbaijani identity, the focus of Azerbaijanis has since shifted to the realm of sports. The Tabriz-based *Tractor-Sazi* football club has earned massive support of ethnic Azerbaijanis across Iran, breaking all nationwide attendance records. Many thousands of Azerbaijani fans accompany the *Tractor-Sazi* football team to its matches, occasionally waving Azerbaijani flags and shouting politically-flavored slogans ranging from moderate demands to establishing school teaching in Azerbaijani, to emphasize on their distinct ethnicity:

“*Haray, Haray men Turkem; Azerbaijan bizim di, Afghanistan sizin di*” (Hey, lookout, I am Turkish”; “Azerbaijan is ours, Afghanistan is yours), explicitly supporting Azerbaijani separatism: “*Yashasin Azerbaijan, Kor olsun dushmanimiz; Tabriz, Baki, Ankara, biz hara farslar hara?*” (Long live Azerbaijan and down with those who dislike us, Tabriz, Baku, Ankara – our path is different than that of the Persians).

This, in turn, has contributed to growing tensions with the Persian fans, whose racist slur of “*Torke Khar*” (Turkish donkey) is returned by Azerbaijani fans: “*Fars dili, it dili*” (Persian dogs), which often results in violent clashes, especially during *Tractor-Sazi*’s matches with Teheran-based teams, *Persepolis* and *Esteghlal*. On 27 July 2010, following a match marked by mutual rounds of racial insults, *Tractor-Sazi* football club’s Azerbaijani fans engaged in violent clashes with the ethnic Persian fans of the Tehran-based *Persepolis* football team and Iranian police. During the clashes, dozens of fans were injured, and police jailed dozens of predominantly Azerbaijani fans. Concerned over the dramatically growing scope of Azerbaijani nationalism aired during *Tractor-Sazi* games, the authorities started to limit the number of predominantly Azerbaijani supporters that were allowed to attend the games (Souleimanov, 2011).

Mass demonstrations by ethnic Azerbaijanis protesting the drying up of Lake Urmia in northwestern Iran, the Middle East’s largest water reservoir and the third largest saltwater lake in the world, recently struck the cities of Iranian Azerbaijan. Environmental protests have been on the rise since August 2011 following the Iranian parliament’s refusal to accept an emergency rescue plan for reviving Lake Urmia, a lake that has the status of a UNESCO biosphere reserve. Regardless of the environmental issue, political secessionist and nationalist movements are using Lake Urmia and *Tractor-Sazi* club issues to make their point.

## Conclusion

As discussed in the first part about the various forms of “*otherness*” for the three different Turkish ethnicities, it appears that there are three different ethnicities in differing geographical areas. The “*others*” for the Republic of Azerbaijan are Armenians; for Iranian Azerbaijanis they are Persians, and for Turkish citizens they are Kurds and Westerners.

One may object to this argument claiming that the same situation applies to Kurds in nearby areas, as they are surrounded by Persians, Arabs and Turks. Therefore, they also might be interpreted as having four different ethnicities of Iraqi Kurds, Iranian Kurds, Turkish Kurds and Syrian Kurds. I will respond that Kurds were not separated for a long period of time. Since the Republic of Azerbaijan for a long time was under the territory of the Soviet Union, it was totally separated from the main diaspora in Iran and those in Turkey; they have lost many cultural ties with the other areas. Thus, nowadays, it is doubtful that by sharing the same history and language, Azerbaijani-speaking people from Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turks of Turkey may still share the same ethnic identity under different political governance. Kurds, however, have always preserved their unity during different regimes in each of these four countries. Moreover, unlike the Azerbaijanis, Kurds have a hero leader, Abdullah Ojlan, currently in jail in Turkey, who is respected by all Kurds of those areas. Also, all of “*others*” for Kurds are non-friendly to them all, whether they are Persian, Turk, or Arab of Iraq or former Syria; Kurds are fighting in all four fronts. However, in the case of

Azerbaijani people, Armenians live in peace in Tabriz while they are considered enemies in northern Azerbaijan; northern Azerbaijanis do not hate Kurds or Persians.

The other reason is the geopolitical situation of Azerbaijanis in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan. The border between these two areas in most parts is a river called Aras, which is quite wide and deep, making it very difficult to illegally cross the border. However, Kurdish areas consist of hills, rocks and caves which make it easy to commute illegally between the borders and establish some militias to cooperate in the fight against four different countries.

To explain the currently powerful nationalistic movement in northwest of Iran, especially in Tabriz, one can relate to Stuart Hall's theory of *constructionism*. Constructionism does not dictate one single approach towards the study of ethnicity and nationalism. Constructionists in general, however, put emphasis on contingency and the flux of ethnic and national identities. They perceive ethnicity and nationalism within the realm of social and political processes, as a product of human agency and a creative social act. If *primordialism* sees ethnicity and national identity as natural, fixed, homogenous and inevitable, constructionism perceives ethnic and national identities as contingent, heterogeneous, and subject to change, as the product of human interaction, history and politics (Hall 1990).

As it was discussed, being under the governance of different states has affected south and north Azerbaijanis differently. Therefore, there is a vast gap in the perception of different nationalist groups about a united Azerbaijani nation and the ordinary people's viewpoints in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey about becoming a united nation. People in their everyday lives are complaining that the "other" brothers and sisters are cheating on them, and their own nationality and their own people are much better than the others. In this situation, nationalistic movements among Iranian Azerbaijanis do not seem to help with building a united Azerbaijan and secessionism, but appear as a movement against the central government in the hope of gaining some basic rights for the Azerbaijani ethnic minorities.

While people in these two territories do not trust each other and do not accept the other one as "us", how could one define these people as belonging to the same ethnicity? It may be the time to redefine our perception that the same ethnicity is not based on sharing the same history but rather on contemporary culture. Living a long time under the rule of the Soviet Union versus Iranian governance, Azerbaijani people are no longer the same; thus we can define two Azerbaijani ethnicities. The concept of ethnicity is fluid and subject to change; beyond a shared language and past history, it's difficult to find other cultural and political similarities between the two groups especially among the younger generations.

Nationalistic movements, nowadays, are using Azerbaijan and Turkish flags to invite people to demonstrate against the current Iranian regime. However, the people and government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey seem to be reluctant to support these movements. Therefore, nationalistic movements, as Hall points out, are thinking in the *primordialism* way. Some argue that Azerbaijan is one nation since people share the same language and ancient, not contemporary, history. However, Azerbaijan is no longer a single entity. The contemporary culture, social situation, politics and everyday life of people in these two countries are far different. Taking the constructionism view, we might redefine a new identity to these two currently different nations. By accepting that people in these two areas do not like and trust the "others", and their cultural roots and political trends have developed differently over a long period of time, we may split the Azerbaijani ethnicity into two different groups who are not the same ethnicity anymore: Iranian Azerbaijanis and Azerbaijan's Azerbaijanis.

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